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AUTHOR Mallinger, Anita E.
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ABSTRACT

Getting students involved in the process of heightening, which is really the transforming of experience and self-expression into fiction, is a basic factor in teaching the writing of fiction. This process of heightening involves two devices for communicating "felt life": concretization and dramatization. In teaching these devices, prewrigting exercises of observation and perception are important for sharpening sensory responses. Next, students should practice writing external descriptions of a character, then present the character's emotions, and later put the character into interaction with another character. This is done by integrating voices, physical detail, and thought passages of concretized emotion to convey the experience of an encounter between two flesh-and-blood people. (JM)

Anita E. Mallinger
5519 Fifth Avenue
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15232
(also: Department of English
University of Pittsburgh
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania 15260)

ALSO DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH
PITTSBURGH, PA 15260

Anita E. Mallinger

The Process of Heightening in Teaching the Writing of Fiction

What's really basic about teaching the writing of fiction? We all know this is not a new question. In fact, as I began thinking of my own response, I found myself wondering whether there was, actually, anything more to be said on the topic. We have asked many times over the years whether creative writing can be taught at all. My own answer, changeable according to mood and to what I feel I've accomplished in my last class, runs the gamut from serious consideration of Flaubert's advice, as quoted by Paul Engle, that we can give the beginner no more, no less, than "a kiss on the brow and a kick in the behind"[1] all the way to acceptance of Richard Scowcroft's assertion that "For the potential writer, the class may be his means of discovering his ability, of speeding up self-criticism, of accelerating his understanding of techniques and forms, of determining whether he wishes to go on with writing."[2] Happily, because I am more often in good moods than bad, and because the majority of my classes do, I believe, provide demonstrable evidence of progress in the creative writing of my students, I agree with Scowcroft more often than with Flaubert: some things about the process of creative writing can certainly be taught.

Of course, we know that when we are teaching creative writing, we are also teaching students to do more than write. Mark Harris, my colleague at Pitt, tells me that he is not concerned with just teaching students to be writers, but with making them aware of their own possibilities. Paul Murray Kendall of Ohio University wants his students to acquire "a heightening of perception leading to deeper realization of the value of experience and a more knowing and sensitive exploration of that experience; this seems to me," says Kendall, "much more important than increased skill in writing fiction."[3] And Richard Scowcroft again: "...something <u>can</u> be done to help the student improve his writing, and in the process he can widen his capacities in reading, criticism, literary craft, and human awareness."[4]

When we note such claims as these on behalf of the creative writing classroom, when we consider all the various developments on the part of students to which we teachers of creative writing believe we can contribute, then the question of "what's really basic about teaching the writing of fiction?" takes on its rightful dimension. It should be asked and responded to repeatedly; answers to it should be constantly reviewed, revised, and even restated when they are good answers. We can accomplish much, but time and effort have inevitable limitations; what is <u>the best</u> we can do?

So often when we talk about deciding on the best we can do, the old dichotomy is put before us: will we encourage the student in self-expression, involve him in getting his experience (perhaps even his soul) out there on the page; or will we set

ourselves to the task of teaching what has been called by various of our colleagues: the craft, the skills, THE TECHNIQUE. To me, this dichotomy is false because I think there is every possibility that fiction is no more, no less, than heightened experience, heightened self-expression; experience, self-expression are simply the beginning products of the fiction, and the process of their eventual transformation into the end product of the fiction is the process of heightening. As Paul Engle says: "The first and most important point about writing is that there is no such thing as material by itself apart from the way in which a person sees it, feels toward it, and is able to give it organized form and an expression in words."[5] Thus, no fiction can come to exist without the author's particular reaction to experience and his initial expression of it. We can involve students in heightening their experience and their self-expression at various levels of sophistication, but each student can begin the process. Some will be able to go only so far; others, those who often proceed to the more advanced fiction courses in a writing curriculum, will go much further. But getting students involved -- at whatever level -- in the process of heightening their experience and self-expression -- that's what's really basic about teaching the writing of fiction.

For self-expression, where fiction starts, this is the best of times. Perhaps the feminist movement has been the single most important influence in encouraging self-expression and creating a climate where the release of emotion on paper is considered healthy and productive. Back in 1972, Adrienne Rich

was urging, in an essay published in College English, that women not avoid writing out their feelings of anger and victimization and that men begin to "give birth to their own subjectivity."[6] Another feminist, Charlotte Painter, has written in her recent book, Revelations, of a "delightful new freedom, suggesting that secrecy is at a low ebb. Diary-keeping," she says, "is on the rise," and adds that between the source material of the diary and the finished artistic product, there is an enigmatic link. "I have a creeping persuasion," she writes further, "that this exploration of consciousness may be evolving into an art form."[7] Perhaps Painter sees here, rightly or wrongly, the beginnings of the evolution of a new art form; but it seems to me that the exploration of consciousness has always been and always will be evolving into a variety of art forms, of which fiction is one. What we have at the present is probably a wider, more extensive, more potentially productive starting place. For I have found that my creative writing students, female and male, are in touch with their experience, especially their emotional experience, more often now than formerly, and the step to self-expression, if it has not already begun, certainly presents no stumbling block; students who voluntarily enroll in fiction-writing courses are ready, even anxious, to self-express.

We have already acknowledged, along with Painter, the enigmatic link between the source material -- the self-expression -- and the art form -- in this case, fiction. I believe that a major part -- perhaps, in its broadest implications, the whole -- of the enigma of that link is the process I have called

heightening. As has been said, it is not a simple process, but it can be dealt with by students in one of its many aspects, at any level of sophistication.

Sometimes the hardest step is convincing students that their self-expression ought to be operated on at all, that it is not already an end product of art. After all, here is the honest, authentic outpouring of the feeling self on paper; is not that task, still a bit difficult for some, enough? Arguments to this effect are occasionally persuasive, especially at a time when it is absolutely necessary for students to be in touch with their feelings, at a time when someone the likes of Anaïs Nin says of poetry, which is not fiction but is certainly fiction's intimate, that it is "no longer to be defined as of old; it has opened its doors to direct statement, to slogans, to marching songs..."[8] No doubt she's right, and such assertions produce in me ambivalent feelings, even reservations about my insistence that self-expression is only the starting point for fiction, for any writing that considers itself an art form. Adrienne Rich, bless her, frees me from such reservations. For though she finds much of her former work "too literary, too dependent on allusion," and though she finds herself "increasingly willing to let the unconscious offer its materials," which is certainly as it should be, nevertheless, she "has not for one moment turned [her] back on conscious choice and selection," and attests further that "For a poem to coalesce; for a character to take shape, there has to be an imaginative transformation of reality which is in no way passive....Writing is re-naming."[9] So then, we must get students to move on from self-expression, for it is just the beginning of the fiction.

Thus, we proceed to deal with heightening, the process I find absolutely basic to the making of any art form and therefore basic to teaching the writing of fiction. In order to determine the nature of the heightening process as it relates specifically to fiction, it might be helpful to decide what we expect our fiction to accomplish. Readers of fiction do not want messages, statements, the TRUTH. ("You tell a story," says Flannery O'Connor, "because a statement would be inadequate.")[10] They don't want what my own teacher, Gladys Schmitt, used to call "undigested chunks of thesis material." Instead, readers of fiction want what Mark van Doren wants when, in his poem, "How To Tell A Story," he asks the writer to make "time... stop/Dead still/So I can be there with you, feeling, seeing"; they want to participate fully in the emotionally important happening of the fiction. Thus, the writer must heighten his experience and his self-expression so that it communicates to the reader what Henry James called "felt life"; and as for me, I find that the principles of heightening most important to my teaching of fiction -- because they are absolutely essential to the communication of "felt life" -- derive from the two qualities which Flannery O'Connor considers the least common denominators of fiction -- first, "that it is concrete," and, second, "that it has to be largely presented rather than reported...[that is,] it relies heavily on the element of drama."[11] The heightening processes of concretization and dramatization are really inseparable and go further than any other devices or techniques of fiction toward communicating "felt life"; for neither abstractions nor reports will achieve the reader's involvement in an

emotionally important happening. To concretize, to dramatize -- these are the processes of heightening that students of fiction at every level must be taught.

So much for the theoretical argument, the establishment, in theory, of what's really basic about teaching the writing of fiction. There is, of course, the matter of practice, and perhaps a little time should be spent on some brief suggestions for teaching the processes of concretization and dramatization. I begin, always, in my lower-level fiction-writing courses, with pre-writing exercises of observation and perception, the purpose of which is to sharpen sensory responses. In looking at the photograph of an old man, for example, students must do more than see the prominent vein in his head; they must imagine the sound of his voice, the texture of his beard, the smell of his cologne. We write about characters, concretizing first their soma, or body, as we describe them both at rest and in motion. Next, we work with concretizing the emotions of the character. Generalized statements of emotion, which the reader will not find convincing, become concretized thought passages which convey the <u>experience</u> of the emotion. For example: she felt that her life was empty (or she felt sad, or she felt depressed, or she didn't have anyone to love her) becomes, in one student's paper:

> As she sat, her gaze shifted slightly, and she began to study her reflection in the dark window of the bus. That picture would look good on a book-jacket, she decided. It was safer to think about the book-jacket than the book. Why was it she seldom wrote anymore, she wondered. Now she saw the photograph of her face, mirrored in the window, on the back cover of a bestseller. The face -- experienced and worldly, they would say of it, yet still

vulnerable. It was not the face of a cynic. Sensitive, young woman artist, lost maybe, but not swept away.

She began to compose the biography that would appear below the photograph. I have no biography, she decided at last. "This woman has no biography," the back cover would read. "And even if she did, it wouldn't concern anyone."

Then we give our characters voices and put them into interaction with another character. Now we are beginning to dramatize, for the task is not to have the two characters fling bits of Truth or thesis at each other, but, by integrating voices, physical detail, thought passages of concretized emotion, to convey the experience of an encounter between two flesh-and-blood people. Here, from another student story, is part of a scene between a soldier who has just returned from Vietnam and the man who runs the employment office where he goes to find a job:

As he walked into the employment office, Mooney made sure to wear his medal pinned to his jacket. It was only a good conduct medal for staying out of trouble for two years while sitting in a tree, but all Mooney had to do was wink, point to his medal, say: "I got this in the war," and polish it with his palm. That, he knew, always impressed people who were impressed with things like that.

"I got this in the war," Mooney told Mr. Simpson, a ruddy little man behind a ruddy little desk in a drafty room.

"I see you were in the service," said Mr. Simpson, a ruddy little voice coming from somewhere deep in his throat. He was fingering through a folder with Mooney's name penciled in on the front.

Mooney straightened up in his chair. "Well," he began, "that's how I got this medal."

"Now about your test results."

"I had this special mission. Top Secret."

Mr. Simpson ran through the folder, then backward, then forward again, then flipped the pages back and forth,

finally dropped the folder on his desk, rubbed his eyes, yawned. He rested his head in his hands, elbows propped up on his desk, his pock-marked face looking tired and ancient.

"Secret Mission?" said Mr. Simpson.

"That's how I got this medal."

"What did you have to do?"

"Well," Mooney hesitated; "it was Top Secret."

"Oh, I won't tell anyone. Do I look like the kind of person who would tell secrets, especially TOP secrets?"

"I don't know," said Mooney.

Mr. Simpson looked interested for the first time, like it was the first time in his life he'd ever been interested in anything. "Come on, you can tell me. What kind of Top Secret Mission were you on? Hmmmmmmmm?"

"I was assigned to this tree," Mooney blurted out.

"And..."

Mooney shrugged.

Mr. Simpson lowered his arms, stared at Mooney, blinked several times like a man who was supposed to be somewhere else and had materialized at this particular spot for no particular reason and was doing his best to dematerialize back from where he came. He blinked some more.

"Sniper duty," Mooney thought he'd add, raising his hand sheepishly like a child wishing to be excused.

Mr. Simpson tried to think. "Sniper duty...Marksmanship," he said. "Marksmanship?" he asked.

Mooney shrugged again.

"Marksmanship," Mr. Simpson repeated to himself.

"Marksmanship," repeated Mooney like a student learning a new language.

"Marksmanship," Mr. Simpson repeated. "Marksmanship," he said, raising his voice, pounding his fist, running to a drawer, pulling out a dusty old folder. "There's this amusement park; let's see, they've been looking for a shooter...here it is...here...Now, Mis..." and as he looked up and turned around, he stopped, blinked at the empty chair in front of him.

> "Mister Mooney?" he said to the empty chair, but the chair didn't answer. He looked up at the open door creaking in the drafty room. "Beggars can't be choosers," he called to the open door, but the open door just kept on creaking back and forth.

The beginning of this fiction was self-expression -- a young man's angry words against the government's mishandling of veteran hiring: "They don't know what they're doing; they make the guys lose self-esteem; they make you feel defeated and insulted; etc., etc. The heightening into the artistic product involved the making of characters, the concretizing of their bodies -- including still detail, gestures, movements, voice -- and of their thought processes. Some concrete details of place make the scene more immediate. The interaction thus becomes a dramatized scene -- an encounter presented and not reported. It is self-expression heightened -- concretized, dramatized. It has become "felt life" in which the reader fully participates. And all students of fiction-writing can at least begin.

Assuredly, my observations here have suggested no important innovations in the field. But, then, I respond not to the question of "what's really new in teaching the writing of fiction?" but of "what's really basic about teaching the writing of fiction?" Heightening experience and self-expression by concretizing and dramatizing is a fundamental process of fiction. It is not an easy accomplishment. "I think," says Flannery O'Connor, "one reason that people find it so difficult to write stories is that they forget how much time and patience is required to convince through the senses....The fiction writer has to provide [emotion and thought] with a body; he has to create a world with weight and extension."[12] Mark van Doren's first words to

the writer in "How To Tell A Story" are "Take your time./Tell it slowly." Students must take the time and have the patience to concretize and dramatize if they wish to write fiction; and we, their teachers, must take the time and have the patience to help them learn. The learning, of course, will bring our students more than the improvement of their fiction; it will provide them the enjoyment and enrichment of a "literary imagination," which just means the ability to do simple, crazy things like give life to the strangers they watch at, say, the bus stop. And, as for us, well, we would not be here if the time and the patience of our teaching did not bring us, too, some pleasure.

Notes

[1]Paul Engle, "The Writer on Writing," in On Creative Writing, ed. Paul Engle (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1966), p. 3.

[2]Richard Scowcroft, "Courses in Creative Writing," in The College Teaching of English, ed. John C. Gerber (New York: Appleton-Century -Crofts, 1965), p. 133.

[3]Quoted in ibid., p. 135.

[4]Ibid., p. 133.

[5]Paul Engle, "The Writer on Writing," in On Creative Writing, ed. Paul Engle (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1966), p. 4.

[6]Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," College English, October, 1972, pp. 18-25.

[7]Charlotte Painter, "Psychic Bisexuality," in Revelations, ed. Mary Jane Moffat and Charlotte Painter (New York: Random House, 1974), pp. 392-393.

[8]Anaïs Nin, "Introduction," in Rising Tides, ed. Laura Chester and Sharon Barba (New York: Washington Square Press, 1973), p. xxix.

[9]Quoted in Albert Gelpi, "Adrienne Rich: The Poetics of Change," in American Poetry Since 1960, ed. Robert B. Shaw (Cheadle, Cheshire: Carcanet Press Ltd., 1973), pp. 132-133.

[10]"Writing Short Stories," in Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose, by Flannery O'Connor, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969), p. 96.

[11]"The Nature and Aim of Fiction" in ibid., pp. 67-74.

[12]"Writing Short Stories," in ibid., p.92.